

First Sunday of Lent
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
18 February 2018

Mark 1: 9-15

We begin this sermon today with heavy hearts and heavy minds. Every time we have a tragedy like Sandy Hook, Vegas, and now Parkland, Florida, I wonder once again what is wrong with the human heart. Much has been said about causes, who is to blame, how we should act, what politicians must do, etc. These are important questions to consider, but today I want to concentrate on the painful loss of life, potential, and security. Not only did we lose the life of innocent children, but the entire community and, indeed the country as a whole, feels less secure today. We were reminded again that not even our children can feel safe in their own schools. We live in a world filled with violence, where love of God and love of other are being forgotten. Experts say our boys are broken. I challenge this to include all humanity. We are all broken. We value the wrong things. We have forgotten the civil way to vent our opposition and our anger, and we resort to violence, without giving a second thought to any other forms of problem solving. We are broken and ever more distant from God. The tools of war are readily available everywhere, there is insufficient help for those in need, our politics has become helplessly polarized, and our children are defenseless victims who often fall pray to evil. I want to think and pray for the victims today. Let the talking heads diagnose our problem. Let politicians continue to skirt their responsibilities. As for us, let us be the Body of Christ, and let us pray for those most affected by this tragedy -- the victims and their families.

In the Gospel of Mark today is Jesus's first day on the job. And this day begins with Baptism, followed by testing. We are told that after the glorious voice from heaven is heard, "This is my son, the beloved, in you I am well pleased", Jesus goes into the desert to fast and pray for forty days. Both the Gospel of Matthew and Luke say that Jesus was "led by the Spirit". Mark uses a stronger expression as Jesus was "thrown out", "expelled", "pushed out" into the desert. Mark does not tell us what the temptations were once in the desert, but Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus is confronted with three different tests or temptations.

The word used in Mark as temptation is often also translated as test by various translators. So, the question for me is, "Was Jesus tested or was he tempted?" These two concepts are different. Many of us who hold licenses as lawyers, doctors, social workers, nurses, etc. know that when we are tested, the licensing body is not trying to flunk us or causes us to lose faith, but rather, the licensing body wants to know that we know what we need to know and have the experience we need to have to perform the duties of our profession. We see this often in Holy Scripture, where God tests his people to see what's in their hearts, or in the words of Deuteronomy 8:2, "Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments." So, the purpose of God's testing is to strengthen a person's faith and character, to help a person grow, to help us clarify our value system and our priorities, to help us achieve wisdom, etc.

Temptation, on the other hand, has as its major goal to trip-up, to make someone stumble, to weaken someone's resolve or faith, to erode confidence, to entice someone to sin. So, when we ask the question, "Was Jesus tested or tempted?", the answer is "yes". From a divine stand point Jesus was tested for the work ahead. From the stand point of the enemy, known here as Satan and in Matthew and Luke as the Devil, Jesus is tempted. The enemy's intention is not to help Jesus discern his mission, clarify his faith, strengthen his resolve... The purpose of the testing is just the opposite. The enemy wants Jesus to take the crown without the necessity of the cross. He wants Jesus to grasp at his divinity so strongly that he would deny his humanity. He wants Jesus to avoid the suffering and the pain that human life entails. He wants to Jesus to ask the question, "Why be human?"

This is an important question: When Jesus could very well appeal to his divinity to escape this messy, confusing, and painful world, why would he want to accept humanity? If you were given a chance to remain human and die, or to somehow enjoy everything that life on earth has to offer, while having a divine body that would never age and die, would you still choose to be human? The answer for me is "No!" I would choose a divine body. This desire for eternity and immortality has been at the center of the human heart since the beginning of creation. That's why many throughout history have looked for a fountain of youth. This is why many look for a holy grail. This is why scientists try to find the cure for the "death gene". We all want to avoid our humanity. At heart, this is what the enemy's temptations are about.

I used to love this passage when I was growing up. Jesus and Satan locked in hand to hand combat. Good and evil battling out. All the cosmic forces of Good fighting against the cosmic forces of evil in an epic struggle for survival. In fact, I liked this passage so much that to me this was a fight between Christ, the superhero, and the Satan, the challenger. It had nothing to do with me. I knew that I wasn't a superhero, so this type of testing or tempting would never come my way. After all, God was not calling me to prepare for a great quest, I was not destined to save the world, I was not the Messiah. Today, I feel very differently about this passage.

I believe the tests and temptations of Jesus are very similar to temptations all of us encounter every day. We all are confronted with these temptations daily. In fact, there is evidence that for Jesus "Satan" means much more than what we understand the word to mean. For Jesus, "Satan" was anything or anyone who would stand on the way of God's plan for him. He tells Peter, "Get away from me Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:33). In fact, I don't know about you, but most of the temptations in my life don't come from that enemy we call Satan, but rather from other human beings. This was the case for Jesus as well. We know that in Mark he was tested by Pharisees "asking for a sign from heaven" (8:11), by those asking about the legality of divorce (10:2); and by the Herodians, who test him about the legality of paying taxes to Caesar (12:15). Most of Jesus's testing came from other human beings. And this is the same for you and for me.

The first temptation was to turn a stone into bread. In other words, the enemy wants to make Jesus use his power for the wrong purposes. How many of you are tempted on a daily basis to use whatever power and authority you have for the wrong reasons. How many of us use power for selfish reasons, or use situational ethics to justify and rationalize our poor choices? My friends this temptation is all too real. The Enemy wants Jesus to use his power to avoid the hunger of fasting, but in a deeper way, this was a temptation to use his power to avoid humanity. We all grasp at eternity and would use any means to attain it. This is a real temptation for all of us.

The second temptation is to jump from a high distance into the rocks below. Certainly the angels of God would come to rescue Jesus before he hit the ground. This is the temptation to prove oneself through performance. The Enemy wants Jesus to perform a great act to prove that he in fact was the Messiah. How many of us seek popularity by attempting to do the impossible? We become professional doers, afraid of just being. We neglect God and others because they don't fit into our "Five-year Plan", they are not part of our strategic goals, they are not part of our professional development aspirations. This is a real temptation. But, Jesus today reminds us that our identity is not limited to what we do, but is primarily determined by who we are. We are God's children. We matter because of who we are. People don't have more or less value because of their place on the pecking order. They have value because they are God's children.

The third temptation is to prostrate and worship the Enemy. This is the temptation to idolatry. This is the temptation to place things or people in the place of God. Many of you have heard me saying that at this very hour there are more people in America's malls than there in America's churches. Idolatry is placing anything else in the place that God must occupy in our lives. We push God out of the center and replace him with money, power, addiction, or any of the other things of which we make into idols. Today Christ reminds us that we must obey the Lord our God and to him and only him we should serve. A life without God is void of meaning and purpose. All our shiny things and all our relationships will one day pass away, only God remains. God is the only one worthy of worship and wants our love and our respect.

My friends, I find it interesting that all of these temptations happened to Jesus after his Baptism in the Jordan. It is the same for us. Most of our temptations happen after our baptism and not before. Life after baptism is filled with strife and filled with temptation, but today Jesus gives us a road map to fight these temptations. Remain rooted in God and worship none other. Do this, and with God's Holy Spirit any of us will be able to resist the seductive temptations of the enemy.

May God continue to bless you, Amen!